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Random Notes

By FISHER AMES

The tide was coming in over the grey flats, at its lip a lacy fringe of froth strangely ephemeral for the vast power behind it. The channels and guzzles were beginning to pulsate in their long beds like blue bosoms breathing deeply. No phenomenon of nature was more familiar to us, yet as H. and myself perched on the pile of old lumber none had ever seemed so new or so arresting.

It was not the rising water or the flats that we saw, but rather the original threshold of a country now so swollen and important it had long ceased to remember this old doo-way. More than mere flesh and blood had passed through it. Integrity had, and determination and a simple sanity of vision that had eventually left its impression upon the nation.

Strange how generations come and go—like the tide. The old Fathers with their church, when it, the parson and the Sabbath

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stood for everything. The church then was virtually both the school and the State. Then the colonials and their growing political views and the power-ful little world of the ship builders, whose swift vessels spun the web of commerce across the oceans.

"You fellows were born too late," said H. "I was cabin boy on the Silver Star at fourteen, back in 1840. Second mate of the brig, Hester, before I was old enough to vote. Might have come to be captain of a full-rigger only there stopped being any ships. In Duxbury. We weren't young enough then to learn new tricks."

For several decades the ponderous ex-draws had creaked slowly and inexorably into the woodlands that hemmed the small town, cutting a network of thin roads, but few of which are traveled today. Every great tree was marked and doomed. The solemn oxen penetrated farther and farther, gutting one little forest after another, to Middleboro on the South and Bridgewater on the north, till no more big trees were left within hauling distance.

Little had been recorded of a new corps of men the industry gained and brought to a high degree of skill. No list of the axemen of Duxbury exists, but it is known there were some famous ones. These were Louis Seaver and old Lon Martin for example. History has given us their right names. These and many others could hit a chalk line at full swing and drive the blade clear through a yearling hog at one stroke.

The country round about has never quite recovered from the onslaught of those ruthless axes. The big trees have gone down to conquer the sea. There are no "bull" pines left. The remaining growth has a rather lean and wary look as if afraid of attracting too much notice. The old pastures and corn fields are like ancient carpets beaten to a state of ragged uselessness.

India, China, Japan, the West Indies, Madagascar and "all those heathen parts." We had the men to man the ships too. There was Salem of course and Medford and Newburyport and East Boston, but little Duxbury did more than her share in the birth of New England's great sea trade.

The Mattakesett, St. Lawrence, Admittance, Vandalia, Oneco, Manito, Eliza Warwick, all full-riggers and who remembers now how many brigs, barks and schooners—all have vanished like wind-driven clouds. No tall ships ever returned, but many a mate and captain came back to permanent moorings

in the old town.

If you picture these deep sea autocrats as Bulls of Bashan with copper lungs capable of setting the air vibrating for half a mile around, or hairy giants muscled like gorillas, you have drawn your images from fiction. There were few tall men among them. Actually they were a rather short race, though often beamy, and deceptively mild of voice and manner. Many of them were a bit duck-legged. Most of them were slow of motion and noticeably reserved.

The way they looked at you, or rather through you, made you think of far horizons and boundless waters. Their thick wrists and curled fingers spoke eloquently of rail and rigging. The resisting arch of their legs was born of the roll and thrust of decks.

Above all the absolute inherent authority of their old faces marked them as a class apart akin to petty sovereigns, men who had exercised supreme judicial power over fellow beings.

Fifty years ago cranberry swamps were assessed at ten cents per acre by Cape towns. But now try and buy some of that land!